

Feature Story

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The NRCS works with Choctaws to improve wildlife habitat

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Neshoba County, Miss. — The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians knows the value of land. That's why the Tribe is working with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve wildlife habitat in the Tribe's communities across the state.

The Tribe, through its director of natural resources, Jason Grisham, is implementing wildlife conservation practices that enhance and restore habitat for wildlife. While habitat has improved for deer, this land also provides refuge for other native animals, including turkeys, squirrels and songbirds.

Since the tribe started working with NRCS, oak trees are dropping ample acorns, a favorite food of deer and other wildlife. Tribal members are also taking down bigger bucks—many with traditional bows.

"The improvements have been huge in my opinion," Grisham says.

November is American Indian Heritage Month and offers a great time to recognize the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians for their stellar record as stewards of the environment.

The Choctaws have used NRCS' Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) to improve 860 acres in Carroll County property this year. Malmasion is the site of a plantation that was built among Choctaw hunting grounds. The plantation burned in the 1940s, and the Choctaws purchased the land in 2001.

A big part of wildlife management is the use of prescribed burning. This practice is not only used by NRCS conservationists, but it is also a method used by the Choctaws hundreds of years ago. The Choctaws used fire to promote diversity of habitat, and now they are using it again to enhance this land. Similar practices were implemented in lands in Attala County, too.

All of this makes for better wildlife and habitat, which is important to the tribe. NRCS tribal liaison Tim Oakes has worked with the tribe's forestry department on managing the forests, providing technical assistance on thinning. As the habitat matures, the Choctaws cut trees to provide firewood. It is tribal custom to use firewood during funeral services, where a fire is kept burning for three days. The Choctaws are able to meet the demand through proper forest management.

Grisham said tribal leaders have recognized the benefits of working with the NRCS in recent years, and that future partnerships are on the horizon.

This is Grisham's first opportunity to work in agriculture. But within a few months of acting in the position, he realized he wanted to stay. He began his career as an administrator for building new elementary schools and a

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fitness center for the Choctaws. Grisham holds a bachelor's degree in business from Belhaven University and a master's degree in sports education from University of Southern Mississippi.

Grisham also oversees the forestry department and provides various services for their elderly and children. He also plans special events. The Choctaws care for their elderly first, providing seed, fertilizer and equipment for their gardens. He manages 400 gardens throughout the Tribal communities.

"It's a sunup to sundown job!," Grisham says.

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Photos by Justin Fritscher

Top Left: NRCS tribal liaison Tim Oakes and Director of Natural Resources Jason Grisham look at two of the bucks he harvested on Tribal lands in Mississippi

Top Right: Forest management is a big part of the duties of Jason Grisham (right). Choctaws use the firewood for heat during the winter, but the bulk of it is used during funeral services, where a perpetual fire must be maintained for three days.